



Five Strategies for Tracing Your British Immigrant Ancestors

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Introduction

Finding the origins of your immigrant ancestor may be one of the most difficult genealogical problems you will try to solve. The solution may be one as simple as a common record, like a death certificate giving the exact correctly spelled place of birth. More often, however, it will be a less common record or a combination of records that will be necessary to solving it.

Contrary to popular belief, most of the work you will do to try to establish your immigrant's place of origin will be in "country of arrival" sources. Rarely are there records in the place of origin that describe where someone left and went to.

Key Considerations

This existence and quality of records in the country of origin. This depends a lot on time period.

- Passenger Lists: not systemically kept by those leaving the UK until 1890
- Censuses: 1841 – 1911 for England and Scotland. For Ireland, essentially destroyed until 1901
- Civil Registration (Vital Records): Begin 1837 in England, 1855 in Scotland, In Ireland, fully in 1864
- Church Records depend very much on specific locality

Starting

Before beginning, consider possible reasons your ancestor immigrated. You may not know the reason but figuring it out may be the key to solving the problem. These reasons are often divided into push factors which encouraged them to leave their homeland and pull factors that drew them to the United States. Here are some:

Push Factors

These include: forced military service, famine, overcrowding/unemployment, limited social mobility and political upheaval/unrest.

Pull Factors

These include: land, relatives already living in America, American propaganda, religious freedom, and employment opportunities.

Use clues from the things you “know” about your ancestor and then consider the most likely push/pull factors helps you keep your ancestor in context. It will also help you extend the scope of your research to others around him/her as needed.

With some context regarding your ancestor’s immigration in mind, here are five strategies. They are all related in a way but listed separately for clarification. The first strategy below is perhaps the most common one:

#1 - Straight Forward Strategy

Often the first thought when searching for an immigrant ancestor is... “If I find the passenger list for the boat my ancestor arrived on, that will tell me where my ancestor is from!” Unfortunately, most of these give no such details. In the United States, precise places of origin don’t appear on passenger lists until the 1890’s with better information once immigration and naturalization law is federalized in 1906.

Passenger Lists

- **Pre-1820 (pre-NARA):** Filby's Passenger and Immigration Lists Index (PILI).
- **Customs Passenger Lists (1820-1891):** Customs Passenger Lists were filed by Ship Masters starting 1 January 1820. Though no official forms were used, required information included age, sex, occupation, country of origin, and intended country of settlement.
- **Immigration Passenger Lists (1891-1954):** The United States Office of Immigration collected passenger lists starting in 1891 and developed a standardized form by 1893. Required information included name, age, sex, occupation, nationality, marital status, last residence, final destination within the United States, if joining a relative who and where, original purchaser of the ticket, race (1903), place of birth (1906), and name and address of closest living relative in the country of origin (1907). 1892-1924 (Internet Ellis Island)
- **British Outbound Passenger Lists:** Not kept until 1890
- **Name Variations:** Search for initials, middle names, nicknames, and maiden names, longer variations or more original spellings, English equivalent of a foreign surname, and become familiar with language, traditions, and culture of ancestor’s country-of-origin

Tips for Finding Passenger Lists and Naturalization Records

For excellent information and links, the FamilySearch Wiki page titled “US Immigration Passenger Arrival Records”.

[https://www.FamilySearch.org/wiki/en/US Immigration Passenger Arrival Records](https://www.FamilySearch.org/wiki/en/US_Immigration_Passenger_Arrival_Records)

If possible, use the 1900, 1910 and 1920 United States Census to see what year your ancestor immigrated and if he naturalized.

Naturalization Records

Naturalization is the process by which a native or citizen of one country becomes a citizen of a different country.

Main Documents

1. Declaration of Intention or 1st Papers: First legal document, renouncing former allegiances and declaring intention to be United States citizen.
2. Petition, 2nd Papers or Final Papers: Legal document filed in court, proving all requirements of naturalization have been completed.
3. Naturalization Certificate

General Naturalization Requirements

Laws changed throughout the years, but the General Rule was:

- 5 years residency in United States to naturalize
- About 2-3 years between Declaration and Petition
- Good moral character
- Performed in a court of record

How to Find Naturalization Records

Aliens could naturalize in **any** court, in **any** state. The alien usually chose the most convenient court. Jurisdiction was not an issue, meaning they could naturalize in any jurisdiction: City, County, State, Federal. Start with the FamilySearch Wiki:

https://www.FamilySearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Naturalization_and_Citizenship

“Learn More” Activities

- Read the wiki article “Beginning Research in United States Immigration and Emigration Records” by clicking on the link at:
https://FamilySearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Emigration_and_Immigration
 - Also click on two of the “Sub-Topics” links on the left, read those articles.
- Use the *Passenger and Immigration Lists Index* to explore two different immigration sources. Use an ancestor of your own, if you can.
- Compare the information on a passenger list pre-Ellis Island (1820-1891) and from 1892 on. Use your own ancestors, if you can.
- Read the wiki article “United States Naturalization and Citizenship” at:
https://FamilySearch.org/wiki/en/United_States_Naturalization_and_Citizenship
 - Click on the “What are naturalization records?” in the Beginners’ Corner section and all five sections will show up. Read them and be prepared to discuss.
 - Click on item 2.9 “Tips for Success” in the “Contents” section on the left.

#2 - Leave No Stone Unturned Strategy

This more likely is the strategy you will have to use to locate your ancestors' town of origin. As described below, calling it "Leave No Stone Unturned" really means not leaving any stone unturned. Think of the process as a criminal investigation. In order to solve the "crime", you have to gather all of the evidence possible. The maybe the name of an acquaintance, the note in a bank register or the death certificate of a child. It may be the end result is that you hope to gather enough evidence to give to the "district attorney" in hopes they may be able to "convict" someone of being your ancestor or, in this case identifying the likely place of origin "beyond a reasonable doubt" or with a "preponderance of the evidence". To do this:

1. Find EVERYTHING about your ancestor's life in the country they immigrated to. Locate birth, marriage, death dates and places and records. Even events that seem extraneous may contain important clues.
2. Do the same for everyone they were related to.
3. Do the same for everyone they are associated with in the new country and who you suspect they were associated with back in the old country.
4. Come forward in time. Documents of the immigrant's children will often reveal the missing link.

Paying attention to any additional information such as occupations, friends and neighbors, religion etc. will also help. See Tracing Immigrant Origins research outline available at https://www.FamilySearch.org/wiki/en/Tracing_Immigrant_Origins for guidance and suggestions.

Checklist – Have You Looked at These Records?

So you think you've uncovered all of the stones? There are many sources where you might find the place of origin when you are least expecting it. Even federal censuses occasionally give a county or town of origin. Note the following list. An asterisk "*" indicates first priority records to search, both because of ease of finding and likelihood of containing desired information. Have you checked all of these?

Banking records	Naturalization*
Biographies*	Newspapers—local, trade, religious, etc.
Business /Employment records	Obituaries/Anniversary notices*
Cemetery/Sexton records	Orphanage records
Census (all years they were alive!)*	Passenger lists (after 1890 these deserve an *)
Church records*	Pension records
Compiled collections	Periodicals
County histories	Poorhouse/Workhouse and Poor Law records
Court records	Probate records
Family records*	School/University records
Family histories	Social Security applications
Fraternal organizations/clubs	Tombstone Inscriptions*
Funeral home records	Vital records (check children of immigrant, too)*
Institutional records (For example: hospital)	
Insurance records	
Land records	
Military records*	

Information on how to find and search many of these records types can be found at <http://Wiki.FamilySearch.org>.

Ultimately, you may not have to search all of these, you really only need to search until you find the one that has the information you are looking for. It's also possible you search all of these and still don't find what you are looking for. If this doesn't work what should you do next?

“Learn More” Activity

- Search for any of your immigrant ancestors in five of the sources from the “No Stone Unturned” list. Try sources you haven't searched before, if possible. Be prepared to discuss the kind of information it gave you to help locate the origins of an ancestor in the “old” country.

#3 - Cluster Migration Strategy

This strategy may be critical for solving an immigrant problem. Most immigrants practiced cluster migration by moving to a place where they already knew someone. Catholics practiced chain migration, and Presbyterian Scots-Irish often came over in groups as did the Puritans. Trace family, friends, and associates that you believe your ancestor may have known in the old country. Reconstructing your ancestors' community in the United States or Canada may lead to the community they came from. With these new people to look for, you can go back to the sources mentioned on the previous pages, and one of their records may give you a place of origin.

The key to making this strategy work is to study the history of the community in which they settle. For example, if your ancestor arrives in the United States and heads straight to Butte, Montana, why? What pulled them there? Study the history of the town, including major economic events. Use censuses to find out who else in that town is from the same country of origin. The surnames may not be familiar to you but any one of them could be in-laws or cousins. You can also use their surnames in strategy #4, the “Surname Distribution Strategy.”

“Learn More” Activity

- Find the place an immigrant ancestor first settled. Avoid big cities. Look for history books on the town and county and search for information on immigration. Share what you learned from one of the history books.
- Use the FamilySearch Catalog to type in a culture and a location and review the results. Review one of the books and explain what you learned.

#4 - Surname Distribution Strategy

You may be able to use surname distribution to pinpoint a location to begin searching, particularly if you have 1) an uncommon surname or 2) surnames of two or more people that you know (or suspect) knew each other. For example, if you know the surnames of the immigrant's parents (you must know the mother's maiden name), the assumption is that they likely lived near each other to have met and married.

Try and locate name lists, like a census or tax record. Something as comprehensive as possible is best. Search your surnames in these databases and then plot out on a map where those with the name are living. Do the same for the other surnames you can connect to your ancestor. This can help you narrow down from the county to a town they were potentially from. (You can try this strategy even if you don't have a county, but without the county it often yields too many results to be helpful). However, you must then search other records to confirm if that town really is where they were from. At least it can give a place to start and gather evidence.

“Learn More” Activity

- Review the wiki article “Surname Distribution Maps” at:
https://FamilySearch.org/wiki/en/Surname_Distribution_Maps
 - Plot two immigrant family surnames to learn about the surname in the country of origin and any possible connection.
 - If there is more than one website, try the various options the learn which one you prefer.
 - Use a map of the country to demonstrate what you learned.

#5 - DNA

One last strategy that may help you discover the place of origin of your ancestor is to do a DNA test. It may be possible to determine where an immigrant ancestor originated using genetic clues found in DNA. For example, if you are an American and your surname is Fallon, and you learn through DNA testing that you match a Fallon family that lives in Ireland today (and their family has lived in the same village for centuries), then DNA has produced an important clue about your immigrant origins. This strategy will work better and better as more and more people take the tests. It may be worth your time to find direct line male ancestors who can do a Y-DNA test which test the DNA that only comes down from the male line of the family. It may also require finding potential male cousins in the country of origin to test as well.

Yes, they cost and science may be complicated but many have had success this way.

“Learn More” Activity

- Go to www.FamilySearch.org/dna for basic information about DNA testing
- Explore the website of the International Society of Genetic Genealogy (www.isogg.org), particularly “A Beginner’s Guide of resources” link on the main page.

Conclusion

Be persistent and thorough. The result may be more rewarding than any other genealogical endeavor.